

Refining the Past

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In this paper I examine two ways in which the past manifests as central to Japanese visual aesthetics. Although distinct, both are manifestations of an attitude that places value on the past, characterizing Japanese (and, to a large measure, East Asian generally) aesthetic thinking. The first is situated in action, with the use of models inherited from past masters in the creation of art, exemplified in the practice of pictorial and calligraphic copying, and the way of tea. The second is situated in objects and values identified with patina and antiqueness. The attention given to the past in art practice, appreciation, and theory is a point of contrast with Western art theory.

I

China has been a fountainhead of culture for the Japanese since the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, and with it artistic practices and ideas about art-making. The Japanese attitude to the past, including the practices of copying I discuss here, as with many other artistic matters, has been heavily influenced by Chinese thought. In China, copying painting and calligraphy was an ancient and venerated tradition, as well as necessary, in order to make available the great works of the canon. Copying perpetuates traditions and is considered by Chinese and Japanese as an act of reverence towards the past.¹ The last of the Six Principles of painting written by Xie He in around 500 CE, which forms the foundation for much subsequent East Asian thinking about art, is ‘transmitting (the experience of the past) in making copies’,² meaning that the painter is ‘to follow and transmit to posterity the methods and principles developed and tested by the masters’.³ Acting in accordance with this principle, the great Song dynasty *literatus* Mi Fei (1052–1107) refrained from making one stroke of his ‘own’ calligraphy until he reached the age of forty. Copying calligraphy became an important tradition for the Japanese early in the Heian period (794–1185), when all things Chinese were enthusiastically welcomed, and has remained central to the Japanese aesthetic tradition.

The Japanese language provides a number of words for learning, or training, but there is a specific term used that describes practising or learning a *michi* or *dō* art, that is, an art

1 On copying practices in China, see Wen Fong, ‘The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting. Part One’, *Artibus Asiae*, 25 (1962), pp. 95–140.

2 *Chuanyi muxie*, translation in Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), p. 133. On the Six Principles, see James Cahill, ‘The Six Laws and How to Read Them’, *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961), pp. 372–381.

3 Mai-Mai Sze, *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting with a Translation of the Chieh tzu yuan hua chuan; or, Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, 1679–1701* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 47

of ‘the way’. The word is *keiko*, which is composed of two characters. The first, *kei*, has two relevant meanings: (i) to stop, remain or contemplate; and (ii) to confine oneself to, or be contented with. The second character, *ko*, means that which is old, from the past, or antique. Learning an art, then, is described in translation as remaining in, contemplating, or confining oneself to the past.

In Japan, calligraphy, *shodō* (literally, the way of the brush), is acknowledged as an art of the ‘way’ and shares a similar institutional structure with other arts such as *kadō* (flower arranging), *kendō* (the way of the sword), and *chadō/sadō* (the way of tea, or the tea ceremony). Each practice takes place within schools (*ie*) with a family at its head, and a hereditary grand master (*oimoto*).

What is striking about these arts is that not merely for the student, but for the seasoned adept as well, practising the art involves repeating standard forms and patterns. The tea ceremony is a good illustration: practitioners make tea and carry out lengthy gatherings following procedures that have been devised by the grand tea-masters. Individual procedures for making tea (*temae*) are conceived by the grand masters of each school and cannot be altered or varied by anyone. Every movement and action – the way in which a utensil is picked up, where it is placed, how it is handled and used – each of these things is done according to prescribed methods, and the methods distinguish tea schools.

Training in the way of tea, therefore, involves learning procedures, including setting and changing the charcoal in the hearth, serving a light meal (*kaiseki*), as well as arranging flowers (*chabana*) and hanging the scroll, cleaning the tearoom and utensils, preparing the path (*roji*) which leads to the teahouse, and so on. The uniformity of the rules and methods for tea is illustrated by each school’s kitchen (*mizuya*, where the host prepares for his guests, etc.) in which rules prescribe the number, size, and height of the shelves. Each of the utensils is always placed in exactly the same position on the shelves. Practised masters are said to be able to move about the kitchen blindfolded. Students, too, sometimes practise tea procedure blindfolded. Tea students and seasoned adepts alike act in conformity to the patterns established by grand tea-masters.

Tea is representative of Japanese aesthetic forms in terms of its formulaic and rule-saturated character. It was with a sense of exasperation that the poet and critic Laurence Binyon described a divergence of practice between Western and East Asian artists (as he understood it to be). He wrote:

On the whole we are struck by a vast difference of method. In China and Japan everything was systematised to an extraordinary extent. There was a way for doing everything, or rather sixteen, or thirty-six, or some other consecrated number of ways, each distinct and defined and each with a name. There are schools of flower arrangement, each with a separate set of principles, mysteries, and methods; there are schools of gardening; there are schools of making tea. And the minuteness, the precision, in defining the perfect way of doing anything, are incredible.

In painting Binyon recognized the same propensity to rules and methods:

For the landscape-painter there are sixteen ways of drawing the wrinkles or curvatures of mountains, corresponding to different types of geological formation, and each way has its own name,⁴

which he goes on to cite.

Years later, Ad Reinhardt, who had specially cultivated interest in East Asian art, emphasized this same drive to codification, for him a lesson that needed to be understood by his contemporaries in America:

Standard forms and identical patterns are repeated and refined for centuries. The intensity, consciousness, and perfection of Asiatic art come only from repetitiousness and sameness. . . . Never anywhere in Asia was there no awareness that . . . the absolute essence that makes art the thing it is, can be realized only through the formula; in Asia this has been understood.⁵

II

Again, it will strike the Western aesthetic mind as odd that the seemingly formulaic process described by Binyon and Reinhardt characterizes artistic practice: we do not ordinarily think of art as simply a matter of following an established method or rule. But we do not have to deduce from the foregoing characterization that these arts might not evidence an aesthetic dimension, by recognizing that the process of following a method or rule itself involves a certain form of judgement. This issue can be philosophically contextualized through the thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein argued in the *Philosophical Investigations* that a rule in itself does not explain or command its usage, but coincides with the agent's ability to apply it. Further, to understand a rule is to be capable of acting in conformity not with something *in* the rule, but with the way in which it is applied by others. Following or obeying a rule, Wittgenstein argued, is a practice, a custom, or a usage, and although the rule itself is referred to as a standard of correctness, its manner of application is governed by the institution or community within which it is followed.⁶

We may use these ideas in considering the traditional arts of Japan. For the student of one of these arts, the way in which he follows a rule is something that must be learned, and

4 Laurence Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan. Based on Original Sources* (London: John Murray, 1935), p. 65.

5 Ad Reinhardt, 'Timeless in Asia', in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Viking Press, 1991), p. 217. Arthur Danto, who has also had a lengthy scholarly interest in East Asian aesthetics, overstates the case when he claims that Chinese painters 'sought to imitate the ancients . . . the traditional Chinese artist had no interest in originality at all. The ambition was rather to appropriate the paradigms of the masters . . . the same motifs could be painted and repainted forever without the motifs being added to.' Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 46.

6 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §§143–155, and 198ff.

he follows the rule correctly when his teacher judges that his actions are in accord with the way in which others practising the art of the same school follow that rule. These are the 'standard forms and identical patterns' repeated over and over by practitioners within individual schools.

As an illustration, the student beginning to study calligraphy is first instructed to paint the Chinese character 'one', which is a single horizontal line. This single stroke is the focus of the first weeks, even months, of study, repeated and corrected until the teacher is satisfied with the way in which the brush is held, engages the surface, moves across the surface, and is lifted. Learning to paint the character 'one' is a matter of 'mastering a technique', which, in Wittgenstein's terms, is equivalent to acting in conformity with the way in which the character is painted by masters and others studying in the same school. Learning a method, then, clearly entails making a judgement about how the rule is to be followed. This is true of the beginner, but for the seasoned adept too the aesthetic judgement is focused on the way in which the rule is to be followed, and it is here that I want to position my aesthetic focus.

The rules of arts such as calligraphy or the way of tea act not merely to constrain practitioners, which of course they do, but also open the possibility for choices and actions of aesthetic value and interest to be made. The rules are such that they invite creative activity *within* the structures of the art. Artistic originality in traditional Japanese arts (or indeed anywhere else) only makes sense when it takes place within a complex of rules, conventions, and traditions. A fundamental difference between the East Asian and the Western art philosophical tradition is that, as Reinhardt noted, in East Asia 'this has been understood'.

Creativity works in the same way in other artistic traditions, but the fundamental place of rules in East Asian arts has long been acknowledged as being essential to their aesthetic value. The determinate nature of the rules of arts in Japan does not discount their aesthetic potential, rather it establishes possibilities for the engagement of the aesthetic mind. Denis Dutton is referring to Western art when he writes:

The 'free' aspect of any artistic performance is what is creatively achieved against a regulating, relatively fixed backdrop. This may be something as definitive as a musical score, the text of a play, a model, or a libretto, or it may be very broad, perhaps vague: a tradition, culture, style, or language.⁷

The creative imagination is not constrained by rules or training, but provided with tools and a foundation with which it can work.

In the case of the way of tea, the rules themselves suggest a quality, perhaps the overriding quality, aspired to by practitioners.⁸ Genshitsu (Sen Sōshitsu XV, b. 1923), the immediate

7 Denis Dutton, 'Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty', *BJA*, 34 (1994), pp. 226–241, see p. 235. This proposition is supported by Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory. According to Kant, 'every art presupposes rules which are laid down as the foundation which first enables a product, if it is to be called one of art, to be represented as possible' (§46, 307). Further, creativity in art requires 'a talent academically trained' because it is only a shallow mind, Kant claims, who thinks he cuts a finer figure on an untrained than a trained horse (§47, 310). Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (OUP, 1991).

8 Sometimes, judgements are applied through extremely subtle variations in the particular way rules are followed, which of course are only capable of being appreciated by other trained tea adepts.

past grand tea-master of Japan's biggest tea school, Urasenke, assesses the achievement of the sixteenth century founder of the modern way of tea, Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), who devised a large number of the rules of tea still followed today, in these terms:

The most momentous change [Rikyū] wrought was to conceive of the ultimate in simplicity. He finally created . . . a way of preparing tea that employed the most economical of actions and the bare minimum of implements.⁹

Rand Castile rightly describes the established methods of tea as instigating a particular aesthetic aspiration:

[T]he rules are not arbitrary, they prescribe a manner of service that is the quintessence of efficiency. Each movement has been considered over the centuries by some of Japan's finest minds. Nothing is wasted, there is no exaggerated motion.¹⁰

The implication is that the rules of tea established by grand masters, though of course seeming complex to the uninitiated, in fact offer a more simple and efficient procedure than ordinary tea preparation and drinking, and that this refinement of action may only be accomplished by learning to follow the rules masters have set down.

Through the notion of efficiency, or the absence of surplus or waste, our attention can be broadened beyond the way of tea, and even the arts, to Japanese aesthetic taste generally. I think it is suggestive that the most commonly used Japanese word for 'beauty', *kirei* – the first word that comes to the Japanese mind when expressing delight in a pleasing object – means both 'beautiful' and 'clean' and is used with regularity in both senses. *Kirei ni suru* means 'to make something clean', and 'to beautify'. Cleanliness, in the sense of want of defilement or impurity, is central to Japanese daily life and Shintō religious observances. But it is with the meaning of 'cleanness', intimating economy, simplicity, or spareness, clearing of excess or ornament, that my interest lies. In this sense *kirei* is used in everyday language to mean tidy, neat, concise, and uncomplicated. The sense of beauty expressed in the word *kirei* encompasses this meaning of cleanness directed both towards action and object, and suggests, I think, a correspondence between a vital aspect of Japanese aesthetic taste generally, and a quality aspired to in the arts (as would be expected, given the ubiquity of the term).¹¹ An implication of this is discussed further in section III below.

However, Reinhardt is suggesting that the arts of East Asia evidence more than just rule-governed-ness, but that their value issues from 'repetitiousness and sameness'. Pictorial copying figures prominently during periods of Western art history also, but we may contrast the (aesthetic and moral) value of the tradition Reinhardt identifies, which centres on the brush, with Western copying practices.¹²

9 Sen Sōshitsu, *The Japanese Way of Tea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), p. 182.

10 Rand Castile, *The Way of Tea* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1971), p. 22.

11 We find the qualitative values of *kirei* mirrored in historical Chinese art writing, in a repeated critical phrase: *bijing momiao* ('the brush is succinct, the ink is wonderful'). *Jing* can also be translated as precise, simplified, or sharp.

12 There are a range of ways of copying in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy and painting, from tracing and faithful imitation, to painting 'in the style of' a master.

The brush used in the traditional painting and calligraphic formats of East Asia is remarkably sensitive to the movements of the artist, and the artist's training is directed towards its assured manipulation. Calligraphy has long held a pre-eminent place amongst the arts of East Asia, and the expressive potential of the brush was initially recognized by Chinese calligraphers in the first centuries CE. Because each character is learned as a certain number of strokes written in a determined order, the literate viewer reads a character as this set of strokes, following the traces of the brush. From the ninth to the twelfth centuries painters adopted from calligraphy a freer use of the brush. Deriving from calligraphic theory, in painting theory, particularly that connected with the *Chan* Buddhist (Jp. Zen) and *literati* traditions (which had a significant impact on thinking about art in Japan), the painted object at this time too came to be seen as a record of action. Wen Fong explains the implications of this way of looking:

The term *biji* [Jp. *hisseki*] or *moji* [Jp. *bokuseki*], the 'trace of brush' or 'trace of ink' expresses the concept that both calligraphy and painting represent the physical presence of the maker. The 'trace' of a great artist was thought to embody material proof of genius, even immortality.¹³

Accordingly, the painting was understood as a presentation of the person's spirit as much as a representation of subject matter.

To copy came to mean to retrace the record of the master's brush, and hence, as Fong describes, the significance of the act is the achievement of a kind of union with the master:

Through *shenhui*, or 'spiritual response,' the original act was re-created. This practice of copying helps to explain the remarkable continuity of Chinese art and culture, in which the artistic process of replication parallels the anthropological concept of genealogy. . . . Later painters, considered heirs to the Great Tradition, who learned from ancient styles, regarded themselves as reincarnations of the early masters. By achieving *shensi* – the 'spiritual likeness' of one of the early masters – a later master brings that artist back to life.¹⁴

The copyist's referent, then, is the action of the master, and the copy's value issues from here. The history of pictorial copying in the West has many facets, but the motivation to copy and values attached to the various practices of copying tend to issue from different sources. For example, the reproduction of icons, carried out by Byzantine monks as part of their religious life, relied for its significance upon the mimetic nature of the art form: the icon and its copies were, in effect, copies of the archetype, for example Christ himself, or the saint. It was not the (normally anonymous) 'original' artwork itself from

13 Wen Fong, 'Why Chinese Painting is History', *Art Bulletin*, 85 (2003), pp. 258–280, see p. 261. He describes further (p. 259): 'the Chinese perceived both calligraphy and painting as having at once a representational and presentational function', i.e. 'the key to Chinese painting lies in its calligraphic line, which bears the presence, or physical "trace" (*ji*), of its maker'. The spirit (of the artist) is often identified with the Chinese term *qi* (Jp. *ki*).

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262. Although there is, to my knowledge, no direct Japanese translation of these two Chinese terms, the idea is central to Japanese aesthetic thinking.

which the value of the copy arose, but its subject. In fact, Gary Vikan writes that '[i]n the eyes of Orthodoxy the icon as an art object virtually disappears'.¹⁵ In later periods, copies of famed pictures by Old Masters have been in high demand. Representative examples come from the early years of the reign of Louis XV (especially around 1722 and the return to Versailles after a six-year absence), when copyists were busily employed to decorate courtiers' apartments. The motivation of the pre-eminent copyist, François-Albert Stiémart (1680–1740), and his patron, the *Batiments du Roi*, was not to revere the past, but tastefully to decorate wall-space, preferably that at high levels, or above doorways.¹⁶ In France, and elsewhere, copies were commissioned into the nineteenth century also for official government purposes: to provide law courts, town halls and the like with suitable pictures (e.g. portraits of heads of state), and for the church.

Copying also has formed a part of art instruction and continues sometimes to be used as a method for training students. However, the justification for having students copy remains an aspect of teaching characterized by Thomas Munro in the following way:

In the West, the training of an artist is often largely restricted to overt, external techniques, the use of materials and instruments. It is commonly felt that aesthetic aims and inner attitudes are personal matters which can be left to each artist; if not regulated, they will take care of themselves.¹⁷

By contrast, the philosophical attitude developed in China and incorporated into Japanese thinking was that technique itself, as perfected by masters of the past, was a means to forming the aesthetic and moral self.

III

The second way through which the past plays a central role in Japanese aesthetic thinking I wish to examine centres on the word *sabi*. Two interpretations of *sabi* are useful for my purpose: (i) identifying value in marks of physical ageing (the predominant meaning today), and (ii) identifying value in the ancient.

Sabi is one of the best-known Japanese aesthetic criteria, in visual aesthetics applied to an object that has acquired a patina, something aged-looking or antique (definition (i)). Its homophone, meaning 'rust', is revealing. As well as suggesting certain values, such as quiet simplicity and agedness, *sabi* also implies a judgement of tastefulness. A typically delightful illustration of the Japanese taste for *sabi* is given by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō in his essay 'In Praise of Shadows':

As a general matter we find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter. The Westerner uses silver and steel and nickel tableware, and polishes it to a

15 Gary Vikan, 'Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium', in Kathleen Preciado (ed.), *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies and Reproductions*. Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers VII (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1989), p. 51.

16 I am grateful to David Maskill for information on François-Albert Stiémart.

17 Thomas Munro, *Oriental Aesthetics* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1965), p. 69.

fine brilliance, but we object to the practice. While we do sometimes indeed use silver for teakettles, decanters, or saké cups, we prefer not to polish it. On the contrary, we begin to enjoy it only when the luster has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina. Almost every householder has had to scold an insensitive maid who has polished away the tarnish so patiently waited for.¹⁸

Amongst other things, this example demonstrates that the quality of *sabi* is sought after; and that, like *kirei*, *sabi* designates a taste that reaches into everyday aesthetic judgements. De Bary recounts the instructive episode of the rebuilding of the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) in Kyoto, after its destruction in 1950 by a mentally unstable monk. Although its new, dazzling façade delighted tourists, the locals are reported to have said: ‘Wait ten years, wait till it acquires some *sabi*.’¹⁹ (See Figures 1 and 2.) *Sabi* describes the pleasing quality of antiqueness discernible in an object: ‘the conviction that the aesthetic value of things is not diminished by time, but enhanced’.²⁰

Sabi is often conflated with another term, *wabi*, as *wabi-sabi*, from which it can be distinguished. *Wabi* is a term that has tended to dominate recent discourse in the West on Japanese visual aesthetics. It is more difficult to elucidate than *sabi*, because it encompasses more complex ethical and spiritual dimensions, but in strictly aesthetic terms, an object described as *wabi* does not necessarily evidence an aged quality.²¹ Rather, *wabi* is characterized by plainness, or absence of affectation or pretension. An illustrative instance is the flower vase made by Rikyū called *Shakuhachi*, consisting of 26.2 centimetres of bamboo with a hole for hanging drilled in the back, and a notch taken from the bottom. Its plainness is startling. Discussing the *Shakuhachi*, Hayashiya Seizō notes the following:

In Japan, the simple custom of cutting a piece of bamboo for a flower holder probably persisted from ancient times; flowers from fields and mountains were arranged in a bamboo vase, or were carried in such a container when taken to somebody as a gift.

18 Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Connecticut: Lette's Island Books, 1977), p. 10.

19 Theodore de Bary, ‘The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics’, in Nancy G. Hume (ed.), *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 55.

20 Itoh Teiji, in Itoh Teiji, Tanaka Ikko and Sesoko Tsune (eds), *Wabi Sabi Suki: The Essence of Japanese Beauty* (Hiroshima: Mazda Motor Corporation, 1993), p.7.

21 Here, by ‘strictly aesthetic terms’, I mean Western, or more specifically Kantian, aesthetic terms, in contrast to East Asian aesthetic thinking in which ethical and spiritual aspirations are enmeshed with the aesthetic. In this way Tanikawa Tetsuzō compared *wabi* and *sabi*, in my opinion rightly concluding: ‘*Sabi* is purer than *wabi* as an aesthetic because it involves the contemplation of an object for its own sake.’ *Cha no bigaku* (Kyoto: Tankosha, 1977), p. 175; trans. as ‘The Esthetics of Chanoyu’, *Chanoyu Quarterly*, 27 (1981), pp. 35–50, see p. 48. Probably the best examination of *wabi* in English remains Haga Kōshirō, ‘The Wabi Aesthetic through the Ages’, in Hume (ed.), *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*. I owe the term ‘absence of affectation’ to my friend Peter Leech, with whom I have enjoyed countless hours discussing Japanese aesthetics.



Fig 1. Photographer unknown, Kinkakuji (Rokuonji), built c. 1398, destroyed 1950. Photograph taken in 1905. Collection of author.



Fig 2. Kristina Pickford, Kinkakuji today, completed 1955. © The photographer. Reproduced with permission.

However, Rikyū was the first to pursue an artistic quality, to attempt to make such a bamboo vase a tea utensil in order to decorate the alcove with flowers.²²

Rikyū, whose aesthetic convictions are identified with *wabi*, took an ordinary object of everyday use and introduced it into the refined and tasteful world of tea. Its production certainly represents economy, in the sense that bamboo is close to worthless, and little has been done to the cut section by way of manufacture. (None of this, of course, implies anything about the vase's value.) In comparison to other vases produced for the cultured élite in the sixteenth century, its method of manufacture was crude and cheap. But the *Shakuhachi* does not represent the economy, or more precisely economy of taste, expressed in *kirei*. Nor was it appreciated for its sense of age (although 400 years later, it may be). The production of the *Shakuhachi* was informed by the *wabi* aesthetic Rikyū promoted, best characterized as plain, or devoid of affectation.²³ An object described as *sabi* need not necessarily be plain or ordinary-looking: what the Kyoto locals meant by *sabi*, in the suggestion to hold off visiting the new Kinkakuji, cannot be substituted by *wabi*. Likewise, no matter how tarnished, the silverware Tanizaki describes would not fit the aesthetic category of *wabi*. Of course, objects may evidence both *wabi* and *sabi*: the terms are far from mutually exclusive. However, they identify different characteristics, and the pleasing quality of age is recognized primarily in *sabi*.

In the seventeenth century, *sabi* was conjoined with *kirei*, as *kirei-sabi*, and here we find an alternative meaning of *sabi* (definition (ii)). The epithet was associated with one man in particular, Kobori Enshū (1579–1647), who was a central figure in artistic circles.²⁴ *Kirei-sabi* taste evolved in Kyoto as part of a renaissance of interest in ancient (that is, primarily Heian period) courtly culture, its literature and visual arts. For instance, in addition to the convention of hanging calligraphic writings of Zen priests established by Rikyū, Enshū decorated his tearooms with the images and poetry of the pre-thirteenth-century 'immortal poets' (pictures called *kasen-e*), or fragments of old scrolls of calligraphy. Many of the works of art he commissioned or owned took their lead from ancient styles, and recited ancient themes. His taste is identified in the Katsura Imperial Villa, built on the site of an aristocratic mansion described in *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1000), though he probably had no direct hand in its construction. The *sabi* that describes Enshū's taste is tied to a self-conscious antiquarianism.

22 Hayashiya Seizō, 'Koyō no bunka – wabicha no sekai', in *Sen Rikyū ten* (author's trans.) (Kyoto: National Museum, Kyoto, 1990), p. 307. The *Shakuhachi* is in the collection of the Konnichian, Kyoto.

23 In his manner of tea procedure also, Rikyū was noted for this same unaffected quality, as recorded here by Chikamatsu Shigenori (1695–1778): 'Rikyū's way of serving tea was not elaborate at all. Neither at its start nor at its finish could any conspicuous point of tastefulness be recognised.' Chikamatsu Shigenori, *Stories from a Tearoom Window* ed. Mori Toshiko (Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1982), p. 89, §55. One of Rikyū's 'Thirty-five Dislikes' reads: 'When pouring water from the ladle don't lift it up imitating the showy action of an oil salesman demonstrating the consistency of his oil.' Sasaki Sanmi, *Chado The Way of Tea: a Japanese Tea Master's Almanac* (Boston, Vermont & Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002), p. 661.

24 Enshū was responsible for the construction of a large number of buildings, teahouses and gardens, such as at the Nanzenji and Sentō Palace, Kyoto. There are still today Enshū schools of tea and flower arrangement.

A late Edo period (1603–1867) humorous poem on tea-masters includes the following: ‘Enshū has refined beauty/ And a cutting blade’ (*Kirei kippa wa/ Tōtōmi*).²⁵ The taste of Enshū (called Tōtōmi in the poem) is described as *kirei* and *kippa*. *Kippa* means ‘cutting blade’, and although the verse is ambiguous, either the idea of an added sharpness or cleanness, or the notion of cutting away excess or refining, fits the logic of Enshū’s aesthetic taste. For example, the Mittan and Bōsen teahouses built by Enshū are light and orderly with clean lines (a deliberate move away from Rikyū’s teahouses, inspired by ordinary, rustic models). At the Bōsen, Enshū devised a style of *shōji* which hangs from the ceiling of the veranda, cutting off the upper view into the garden from inside the tearoom. The effect is striking. It is a mark of the nature of Enshū’s *sabi* that his taste can be described without contradiction as both *kirei* and *sabi* – but the values represented by *wabi* do not define his taste.

The value of arts of ‘the way’ is identified with the rules and models inherited from grand masters of the past, which direct the methods of practitioners who follow them. Often, as in the way of tea, the rules institute economy and refinement of action, which finds a parallel in Japanese aesthetic taste generally. The aesthetic value of an object, likewise, is recognized in its age, conjoined with the quality of refinement in the aesthetics of Enshū. Both aspects of the past, in art practice and the appreciation of objects, suggest comparisons in Western tradition. Antiques, of course, are admired, but in the West marks of age, wear, and tear, tend to be seen as imperfections, as opposed to ‘noble patina’.²⁶ As we have seen, traditions of copying have arisen in the West, but copying does not hold aesthetic (or moral) value as it does in Japan, and East Asia generally. ‘The discipline of looking backward’, J. Thomas Rimer writes of Edo period painters, ‘provided a means that could allow the artist to rise above the dangers of a contemporary mediocrity in order to seek what was truest in his culture and, ultimately, in himself.’²⁷

There is a further and concluding way in which an object’s age and value are connected, and the past is manifested in the East Asian art object – through the application of collectors’ seals and colophons. The Western art-lover and connoisseur may acquire knowledge about the history of an aesthetic object – including the hands through which it has passed – and this knowledge may enrich the pleasure he takes in it, but such history of the art object is not revealed in the physical object itself. From the seventh century, art collectors in China have marked their ownership upon the surface of paintings and calligraphic works with seals, a practice adopted into Japan. The convention was taken up by Western collectors of *ukiyo-e* prints in the nineteenth century. Colophons inscribed by acquaintances of the painter shared painting surfaces – and when space ran out, mounts – in China from the fourteenth century. From around this time in China and Japan owners of paintings have also attached their affection for a painting in the form of a colophon, often a poetic

25 Cited by Kumakura Isao in ‘Kan’ei Culture and *Chanoyu*’ in Paul H. Varley and Kumakura Isao (eds), *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), pp. 142–143.

26 See Yuriko Saito, ‘The Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency’, *JAAC*, 55 (1997), pp. 377–385.

27 J. Thomas Rimer, ‘An Afterword Posing as a Foreword’, in Brenda G. Jordan and Victoria Weston (eds), *Copying the Master and Stealing his Secrets: Talent and Training in Japanese Painting* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), p. xxi.

response to the picture. An object's history, those who have owned it and their affection felt for it, is part of the *perceived* object, in a manner entirely foreign to Western art.²⁸ There is no comparable history of marking, or inscribing upon, the surface of a painting: there is no comparable role for the past in refining our aesthetic engagement with art.²⁹

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- 28 Collectors' marks, which came into use in Europe in the seventeenth century, were used for identification of large collections. Unlike East Asian seals, they tend to be very small, and mark an insignificant location on a picture's surface.
- 29 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for helpful feedback, and Mara Miller and Matthew Larking, who read an early draft of this paper.